

## **What is histoplasmosis?**

Histoplasmosis is an infection caused by the fungus *Histoplasma capsulatum*. The symptoms vary greatly but it primarily affects the lungs. It rarely invades other parts of the body.

## **Who gets histoplasmosis?**

Anyone can get histoplasmosis. Positive histoplasmosis skin tests are seen in as many as 80% of people living in some areas of the eastern and central United States, although most of these people never show any symptoms. It is often called the "cave sickness" as it is sometimes seen in persons who explore caves for a hobby. The more severe forms of this disease are seen more frequently in persons who have problems with their immune systems, such as persons with AIDS. Bats, dogs, cats, rats, skunks, opossum, foxes and other animals can get histoplasmosis and may play a role in spreading the disease.

## **How is this fungus spread?**

The fungus grows in soil enriched with bat or bird (especially chicken) droppings that have gathered for three or more years. The fungus produces spores that get into the air if the contaminated soil is disturbed. Breathing in these spores causes infection. You cannot get histoplasmosis from another person.

## **What are the symptoms of histoplasmosis?**

Most people with histoplasmosis have no symptoms. For those who do get sick, illness can vary from very mild respiratory disease to a serious illness involving the whole body. Most people have the mild respiratory form of illness with fever, chest pains, weakness and sometimes a cough. The most serious forms of the disease can lead to death if they are not treated.

## **How soon after exposure do symptoms appear?**

If symptoms appear, it is usually within 5 to 18 days after exposure, with an average of 10 days.

## **Where is the fungus that causes histoplasmosis found?**

*Histoplasma capsulatum* is found throughout the world and is common in many areas of the United States, including parts of central and western Virginia. The fungus grows in soils that are mixed with lots of bird or bat droppings, e.g., around old chicken houses, roosts of starlings and blackbirds, in decaying trees and in caves and other areas where bats live.

**What is the treatment for histoplasmosis?**

Treatment is not usually recommended for histoplasmosis; most people will get better without treatment. Specific antibiotics are used to treat severe cases of histoplasmosis. Persons who have had histoplasmosis usually do not get it again.

**What can be done to prevent the spread of histoplasmosis?**

It is not practical to test or decontaminate all possible places where the fungus may be found but the following steps can be taken to minimize exposure: avoid areas where the fungus might grow (such as those listed above); minimize exposure to dust by gently spraying possibly contaminated areas with water before disturbing the soil. Workers should wear disposable clothing and a NIOSH/MSHA approved dust/mist respirator capable of filtering out particles larger than 1 micron in diameter.

